# Vocabulary Development During Read-Alouds: Examining the Instructional Sequence

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### **ABSTRACT**

Reading aloud to children is a recommended practice in early childhood and primary-grade classrooms that is purported to enhance vocabulary growth. General guidelines can be found in the literature, but practitioners often rely on conventional wisdom and their own instincts to embed vocabulary instruction into their read-alouds. This paper examines the instructional sequences used by four primary-grade teachers who had not participated in any specific professional development related to effective practices as they incorporated vocabulary development into their read-alouds. Although many similarities among the teachers were noted in the types of strategies used, such as questioning, labeling, and using context, significant variation was found in the number and sequence of strategies utilized within a single instructional exchange. Differences were noted with regard to the age group of the students and the pedagogical beliefs of the teachers. Furthermore, results suggest that many of the typical instructional sequences used during read-alouds may actually detract from vocabulary learning. Implications for professional development and teacher education are discussed.

Literacy Teaching and Learning Volume 14, Numbers 1 & 2 Reading aloud to children is a developmentally appropriate, commonly employed practice in primary classrooms (Bravo, Heibert, & Pearson, 2007) that is purported to promote oral language development, comprehension, build background knowledge, and expand vocabulary (Beck & McKeown, 2001; Morrow, 2007). Recent findings from the National Early Literacy Panel indicate that shared-reading activities make significant contributions to the development of print knowledge and oral language skills (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2009).

Many resources are available to teachers to provide guidance and exemplars of best practice. Books on vocabulary development are readily available, and numerous articles on the topic can be found in professional journals. Guidelines for vocabulary teaching can be found in published works and commercial programs. There are certainly however many teachers that incorporate vocabulary instruction into their read-alouds in the absence of a formal program, relying on knowledge gleaned from personal readings, professional development, and experience. The results may be an effective instructional experience, or a piecemeal approach that incorporates diverse elements into a sequence that lacks focus and cohesiveness. This study examined the ways that four teachers infused vocabulary instruction during read-alouds. Three questions guided the analysis:

- 1. What specific strategies did the teachers use?
- 2. How did they link strategies into instructional sequences?
- 3. How did instructional sequences differ among the teachers?

The results provide insight into current practice in ways that might guide professional development and preservice teacher education as well as inform future research.

## **VOCABULARY AND READ-ALOUDS**

The importance of vocabulary to reading achievement is well documented in the literature (see reviews by Baumann, Kame'enui, & Ash, 2003; Pressley, 2000). Vocabulary has been identified as a "critical factor in building proficiency in reading" (Bravo, Hiebert, & Pearson, 2007, p. 140) and limited vocabulary knowledge is viewed as a contributing factor for struggling readers of all ages (Fisher & Blachowicz, 2005; Justice, 2002). The National Reading Panel (2000) identified vocabulary as one of the five core components of effective literacy instruction during the primary grades.

For primary-grade children, who are typically pre and beginning readers, read-alouds are an important source of novel words (Elley, 1989; Senechal & Cornell, 1993; Whitehurst et al., 1994) and a vehicle for instruction. In fact, in their review of the literature, Biemiller and Boote (2006) concluded that in the 13 studies of vocabulary development with younger children, all of them featured storybook reading as the foundation of the instructional design.

Read-alouds are adult-mediated interactions, and thus provide a supportive context for learning. Through intonation, gestures, and facial expressions, teachers provide clues about word meanings. They may digress from the text to add information, examples, and clarifications that support young children in the construction of word meanings. Questions can be asked to encourage deep processing. Children can join in the reading in ways that foster active learning.

Additionally, the read-aloud context may be an important venue for vocabulary instruction that narrows the word gap between low-verbal children and their classmates (Coyne, Simmons, Kame'enui, & Stoolmiller, 2004). Children with low vocabulary skills appear not only to benefit more from adult mediations than their more-capable peers, but also to require more of such mediations to benefit from incidental word exposure during read-alouds (Elley, 1989; Justice, Meier, & Walpole, 2005; Wasik, Bond, & Hindman, 2006).

The manner in which a book is read aloud can have a significant impact on the resulting word learning and comprehension. Book reading style is predictive of vocabulary gains 1 year after the reading event occurred, and the amount of child-analytic talk (discussions that included making predictions, talking about words and word meanings, and analyzing story elements) is strongly correlated to gains in vocabulary (Dickinson & Smith, 1994), suggesting that "variation in how teachers in typical early childhood classrooms discuss books with 4-year-olds in full-group settings is strongly related to long-term growth in early vocabulary development and story comprehension skills" (p. 117).

Effective read-alouds feature a "systematic approach to developing children's understanding of vocabulary, such as inserting short definitions of words and phrases during reading" (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007, p. 743). Although children do learn some vocabulary incidentally in as little as one read-aloud of a text (Senechal & Cornell, 1993), teachers often stop and elaborate on a particular word, providing explanations or decontextualized definitions (Bravo, Hiebert, & Pearson, 2007) that support children's learning. In general, read-aloud styles that encourage active participation from children, such as interactive or coconstructive styles, are found to be more effective in promoting word learning than performance styles of reading (Brabham & Lynch-Brown, 2002; Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Fisher, Flood, Lapp, & Frey, 2004).

Despite the fact that reading aloud is supported by research as a significant component of instruction, there is no single agreed upon practice for doing so (Fisher et al., 2004). Much of the research on vocabulary development within read-alouds has focused on comparing questioning strategies with other forms of elaboration such as labeling or comments, with some conflicting results. Senechal and Cornell (1993), for example, compared different methods of elaboration during book reading—questioning, recasting, word-repetition, and verbatim reading—and found no statistically significant difference between the treatments. Verbatim reading was found to be equally effective as the interactional and adult mediated approaches. Ard and Beverly (2004) found that the

combination of questions and labeling during reading was more effective than labeling alone, while Justice (2002) found labeling was found to be more effective for word learning than adult questioning.

It is not difficult to imagine the difficulty a practitioner would have in applying this research to his/her own practice. How does one decide which strategy to select for a given word, age group, or context? More importantly, strategies such as questioning or labeling are seldom used in isolation in the classroom context, but are combined in myriad ways to form instructional sequences. It is perhaps these sequences that determine the ultimate effectiveness of instruction and the resultant word learning.

# **MODEL INSTRUCTIONAL SEQUENCES**

Attention to vocabulary words in read-alouds should be considered in terms of instructional sequences rather than single strategies. In the classroom context, teachers make a decision to attend to a particular word and select an appropriate instructional strategy or combinations of strategies for their purpose. The most concise instructional sequence might consist of a single utterance or action in which the teacher provides a synonym or brief definition of a target term, makes a gesture, or points to the illustration to label an item. At other times, the instructional sequence might be quite lengthy and incorporate multiple strategies, particularly when developing conceptual understanding of a target term.

Experts in the field have suggested several instructional protocols that teachers can use to guide their instructional sequences. For example, Roskos (2008) developed the Say-Tell-Do-Play protocol for vocabulary instruction with preschoolers. Teachers using this approach select five words from the text for instruction. Before reading, the teacher presents each target word with a prop or illustration. The teacher says the word and the children repeat the word, solidifying a phonological representation of the term. The teacher provides an easy to understand definition, and then asks the children to tell the definition to a friend. During the reading, the teacher stops when the target term is encountered, repeats the definition, and again asks the children to tell the definition to a friend. An appropriate action or sound is added to reinforce word meaning. Finally, after the reading, children are encouraged to use the words in their play.

Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002) present an instructional sequence that includes contextualization, building a phonological representation, an explanation of the word, and examples of the word in other contexts. To begin the sequence, students are reminded of the context in which the word appeared in the story, and are asked to say the word aloud to solidify a phonological representation. The teacher then provides a simple, child-friendly definition or explanation of the word. Providing or eliciting examples helps the children to

make meaningful connections and to provide practice using the term in contexts that vary from the story line. The sequence ends with the children repeating the target word.

The recommended procedures in *dialogic reading* call for teachers to prompt, evaluate, expand, and repeat (Whitehurst, et al., 1994). In prompting, the teacher asks questions about the target word. Feedback is given during the evaluative stage. Appropriate answers are confirmed and misconceptions are clarified and corrected. When expanding a child's response, the teacher repeats the child's answer and adds information or asks a question that will extend the discussion. Finally, the teacher has the child repeat the recast response.

Anchored instruction, developed by Juel and Deffes (2004), adds visual representations of the target terms to the instructional sequence. Target words are introduced in the context of the story and meanings are discussed. The unique feature of anchored instruction is the decoding component. During the instructional sequence, the teacher attends to the letters and sounds of the word, usually with the target words written on word cards that are displayed as they are encountered in text.

In a comparison of three different models of instructional sequences, Silverman (2007) found that analytic and anchored instruction were more effective than contextual approaches. All models presented children with definitions of target terms but emphasized different aspects of word learning within the instructional sequence. In the contextual method, questions were asked to focus children's attention on target words and to facilitate connections to prior knowledge and experience. The analytic approach tapped prior experience and knowledge but also encouraged children to analyze words and to "think about their application in various other contexts" (Silverman, p. 102). Anchored instruction incorporated elements from the contextual and analytic methods, but also focused attention to the grapho-phonemic aspects of target words (Silverman). These findings suggest that teachers can enhance word learning through read-alouds by incorporating elements into the instructional sequence that draw students' attention to aspects of the word beyond its definition.

### **METHODOLOGY**

In the introduction to An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement, Clay (1993) discusses the critical role of systematic observation in obtaining a rich account of what is occurring with a child's learning, stating that, "in every way the information that is gathered in systematic observation reduces our uncertainties and improves our instruction" (p. 2). Similarly, systematic observation, with the researcher taking the role of a nonparticipant observer, provided a means of capturing the everyday read-aloud practices of teachers in primary classrooms.

# The Teaching Context

This study was conducted at Westland School (pseudonym), a small private school located in a large metropolitan area in the south central United States. The school is associated with mainstream Protestant denomination and has preschool as well as K–5 classes. Classes are small: the four observed classrooms ranged in size from 11 to 17 students. The student population reflects the diversity of the surrounding neighborhood (43 % White, 22% African American, 11% Hispanic, 24% Asian). Second language learners are free to enroll, but no special classes are offered to facilitate language acquisition. Scholarships are available, but the head of school reported that they received very few applications for financial aid. Thus the majority of the families were paying tuition, so it is unlikely that families with limited financial resources were represented in the student body. Since the study focused on teacher behaviors, more-detailed information about the students was not gathered.

# **Observing Teaching Behaviors**

Four teachers (1 kindergarten, 1 first grade, 2 second grade) with a range of experience participated in the study. Debby (20 years) and Barbara (10 years) were veterans, while Patricia (2 years) and Cindy (1 year) were new to the profession. All names appearing in this paper are pseudonyms.

Each teacher was observed four times over a 6-week period with each observation lasting for approximately 1 hour. Observations were scheduled at the teacher's convenience to (a) minimize disruptions to the normal classroom routines, and (b) increase the authenticity of the experience for the teacher and students. As much as possible, observations took place at a variety of times in the day to ensure a representative sample of read-aloud interactions.

Since all of the participating teachers indicated that they regularly read aloud in their classrooms, the teachers were told that the researcher was interested in how they developed vocabulary through read-alouds and were asked to read to their class as they normally would do. Additional instructions were not given so as to avoid leading participants to include particular practices. This approach is advocated by Merriam (2001) when she suggests that researchers should "be honest but not overly technical or detailed" when providing explanations to participants (p. 99).

Observations were audiotaped using a digital recording device, providing documentation of the teachers' and students' interactions. Additional data were gathered in field notes. These data included descriptions of the classroom, students' work that was displayed or that was in progress during the observations, as well as data not captured by the recordings such as gestures and movements. These data added to the description by providing additional information about the context of the reading events.

# **Data Analysis**

During the observation stage, a thick description of the read-aloud practices of the participating teachers was compiled through audiotaping of the events in conjunction with additional notes and observations recorded in a field journal. The transcripts were analyzed in a recursive or spiral manner (Creswell, 1998). After reviewing the data to increase familiarity with the events, the first stage of analysis was initial low-inference coding (Casprecken, 1996). This stage established categories of interactions which included (a) specific strategies such as questioning, labeling, or providing a synonym; (b) words targeted for instruction during the read-aloud; and (c) number of exchanges. Transcripts were reread and high-level coding (Carspecken) established patterns of interaction and dominant themes that included identifying similarities to model instructional sequences and the timing, purpose, and effectiveness of various sequences. Peer debriefing occurred at regular intervals through the analysis and member checks were used as a means of increasing validity by ensuring that the reconstructions of the data accurately depicted the participants' perspectives (Carpsecken).

Dialogic data were gathered using semistructured interviews to obtain information that was not directly observable (Merriam, 2001) and to confirm or disconfirm emerging themes. During the course of the observations, questions arose that required additional data to ensure the emic perspective and to confirm or disconfirm researcher interpretations. Based on the preliminary analysis of the observation data, an interview protocol (Carspecken, 1996) was constructed. Individual interviews were conducted over a 2-week period following the conclusion of the observations. Topic domains for the protocol included teaching experience, understanding of vocabulary development, use of read-alouds, and instructional strategies. Participants talked about their reasons for engaging in particular practices, beliefs about how vocabulary is learned, the use of read-alouds to promote vocabulary development, and their personal teaching philosophy. Data from these interviews served as a source of triangulation, confirming interpretations of the data such as a preference on context clues as instructional strategies seen in Debby and Cindy, as well as a reliance on intuition to sense when words were unknown by the students. Transcripts were revisited following analysis of the interview data and codes were further revised and refined.

Student outcomes in vocabulary learning were not examined in this study. The purpose of this study was to describe the current practices of four teachers as they sought to develop vocabulary while reading aloud to their classes. Teachers were asked to conduct these read-alouds as they normally would, and their practices did not include pretesting of vocabulary knowledge or posttesting to evaluate learning. Although measuring vocabulary learning would provide important information about the effectiveness of their instruction, it

would have imposed a structure on this study that would be inconsistent with its goals of describing teacher practices by requiring them to read certain books, to preselect words for instruction, and to pretest word knowledge. Additionally, it is possible that testing would cause the teachers to alter their practice in ways that would create more-favorable outcomes, and thus was inappropriate for this study.

## **RESULTS**

This study focused on examining the current practices of primary teachers for developing vocabulary during read-alouds. In this context, teacher practice can best be described by examining the instructional sequences, defined as the series of teacher/student exchanges that occur related to a particular word selected for instruction. Read-alouds are situation-specific in that they are negotiations between the text, the teacher, and the students. Thus, each reading and instructional sequence within that reading is in some respects unique. Nonetheless, patterns across the transcripts emerged that provide useful insights.

# **Similarities to Existing Models**

The teachers in this study did not express familiarity with any structured methods of sequencing instruction and indicated that they had not had any formal professional development on the topic. It is therefore interesting to note the similarities that exist between the instructional sequences observed and the existing models such as dialogic reading and anchored instruction. In some cases, the sequences are quite closely matched to the existing models, while other times elements of several methods are combined.

Cindy's pattern of instruction used many of the elements from the research-based models but did not adhere closely to one specific method. Her sequences were typically initiated by a question that referred students back to the text to a sentence just read, suggesting a contextual approach. She usually repeated the question at least once, as seen in the following example. This practice provided additional time for the students to formulate responses, but also ensured that students developed an accurate phonological representation of the target word. When a student suggested an incorrect or partially correct response, Cindy asked other students for their ideas as seen in the following example.

Cindy: (reading from Sarah, Plain and Tall, MacLachlan, 1985) 'No one

knew where Seal slept. Seal was a roamer.' What do you think

roamer means? A roamer. What do you think, Nathan?

Student: Sneaky?

Cindy: Sneaky, that could — yeah, it could be sneaky. What do you

think, Susie?

Student: She likes to walk around when it gets dark.

Cindy: Yeah, kind of like to walk around. Look at stuff. She doesn't like

to stay put.

Cindy initiated this sequence with questioning, directly after reading the text. She used the word three times before calling on a student. The first student made an incorrect inference from the story context. Cindy appeared to acknowledge the student's thinking, but called on an additional student who adds to the definition. She validated the second child's response, and then extended it a bit. She ended the sequence with her own definition, using child-friendly language as recommended by Beck and her colleagues (2002).

Cindy seemed to be aware of the importance of making connections to students' prior knowledge, a feature of many of the models. She often reminded students of other contexts in which they had encountered a word or concept. For example, when talking about the barking of a seal, Cindy asked the students if they had heard that sound before and asked the children to imitate the sound. She then reminded them of a movie they had watched in class in which a barking seal was heard.

Cindy: She was barking like a seal. Have any of you ever heard a seal

bark?

Students: Yes.

Cindy: What's it sound like? Students: (make barking noises)

Cindy: Yep, kind of like that, kind of like that. Very good, very good.

Do we ever — I think we heard a seal bark when we watched our

movie, didn't we?

During a discussion of the title character in *Sarah*, *Plain and Tall*, Cindy used the word *humble*, which was unfamiliar to at least one student. Cindy defined the word, then provided a contrasting attitude, using physical imagery. This type of contrast is consistent with analytic approaches of instruction (Silverman, 2007).

Cindy: describing Sarah) Maybe *humble*? Humble?

Student: What's humble?

Cindy: When you're humble, you are — you don't brag. Like she didn't

say — I'm very pretty — like a movie star (Said in an affected voice as she strikes a pose, primping her hair) did she? No, she didn't. She just said I'm plain and I'm tall. Pretty humble.

Patricia's typical instructional sequence resembles dialogic reading (Whitehurst, et al., 1994). She begins with a prompt, usually asking what the word meant within the context of the story. She evaluates the students' responses, often adding information or rephrasing their comments to a close approximation of the definition. With the addition of repetition, the sequence would include all of the elements of the dialogic model.

Patricia: (reading from Pet Sitting Partners by Murphy, 2003) "She put

her hand in the cuff of Anna's jeans. 'Look everybody,' Anna

gasped. 'It's Alfred!'" Where was Alfred?

Student: Awww. (as if she thinks it's cute)

Patricia: I don't have cuffs on me. Everybody knows what cuff is right?

Student: Right here (pointing to the illustration in the book).

Patricia: Where your pants fold up. Like that (folding the hem of her

pants up to make a cuff)

Student: That's cute.

Patricia: Yeah, and that's where Alfred was.

In the following exchange, the instructional sequence used by Patricia is similar to anchored instruction (Juel & Deffes, 2004). Patricia introduced the folk tale genre in preparation for the read-aloud of the Appalachian folk tale Soap, Soap, Don't Forget the Soap, by Birdseye (1996). She provided the context, a definition, and then information regarding the spelling.

Patricia: And so this is an Appalachian folk tale. It's a tale that's told in

that region. Does anybody know what a folk tale is?

Student: That it's — that it's not a true story.

Patricia: Okay, good point. A tale is something that is not a true story.

So we add folk tale. (The words folk and tale are written on two different colors of sentence strips. She places them in the pocket chart on the wall.) Now we already know that a tale is something that's not a true story. T-A-L-E. (spelling word) We don't spell it like a mouse's tail or a cat's tail, do we? How do you spell a tail as

in an animal's tail? Peter?

Student: T-A-I-L

Patricia: T-A-I-L. So this tale which means a — what did you say Carlos?

Student: A story that is not true.

Patricia: A story that is not true. Okay, so now we're gonna add folk to

that word to make it a folktale (slides the two words together). Can everybody see that? I just put folk in the beginning of it. So

now we have what kind of word?

Student: A compound word.

Barbara exhibited a great deal of flexibility in her instructional sequences. When reading stories from the adopted reading series, Barbara tended to follow the suggestions in the teacher's edition quite closely. The instructional sequence is similar to anchored instruction in the emphasis on the visual aspects of the words. In one observation, Barbara had the target terms written on sentence strips which were attached to the board as they were introduced. In another instance, she wrote the words on the white board, calling attention to the letters and sounds.

Barbara: We're going to see this word in our (writing the word *collect* on the board). Raise up your hand if you can read this word — sound it out and read — remember it has a double consonant in the middle doesn't. Paula?

Student: Collect.

Barbara: Collect. The word *collect* means to put together in a group; to get things and put them together. Collect. Collect. Remember how on the Hundred Days of School we brought in our Hundred Collection? You collected a hundred things – you put them together, right? You put them together – you got them and put them together – collect.

In this relatively short exchange, Barbara's students heard the target word six times. In addition, they heard the word with morphemes added in *collection* and *collected*. Barbara stated the definition five times and related the target word to a common class experience. She wrote the word on the board and drew students' attention to the spelling feature of the double consonant.

When discussing the word *apron* in *The Bear's Picnic* (Bernenstain & Berenstain, 1996), Barbara's sequence is similar to dialogic reading. She prompts, evaluates the child's response, and then expands it to extend the definition. She also adds labeling to the sequence to provide children with a visual image of the target term.

Barbara: (reading text) "Mother Bear put your apron away. We are going on a picnic today." Does anybody know what an *apron* is? What is an apron? Carrie, do you know what an apron is?

Student 1: Something you cook with.

Barbara: Something you cook with? Do you *cook* with an apron or do you *wear* the apron?

Student 2: Wear it.

Barbara: You *wear* the apron. You wear the apron why?

Student 3: (garbled response)

Barbara: So you won't get your clothes dirty, right. An apron is usually worn so that it protects your clothes from getting dirty. See the

apron that Mother Bear is wearing? (pointing to the apron in

the illustration)

Debby's instructional sequences were often quite lengthy and she relied heavily on contextual approaches, described as sequences in which "the teacher asked questions leading children to think about words and connect new words with their background knowledge and experience" (Silverman, 2007, p. 102). When Debby provided the definition, she tended to give the students a lot of information, often including the category or function of the word. During a discussion of the word *bonnet*, the student who responded first appeared to have some degree of familiarity with the word but indicated that she didn't know the purpose of a bonnet. Debby extended their knowledge by providing some historical information as she described the function of the bonnet. Since the children had recently completed a social studies unit on pioneers, this discussion helped connect the new information into known concepts.

Debby: What's a *bonnet*? Do you all know what a bonnet is? What's a bonnet?

Student 1: A thing that you put over your head. I don't know what it's for, but you put it over your hair. Boys don't wear them, only girls.

Debby: Okay, boys don't wear bonnets. This is like an old fashioned hat. Sometimes you tie it under your chin (pantomimes tying a bow).

Student 2: Oh yeah,

Debby: And they wore it a lot.

Student 3: Oh yeah, and it goes around your head.

Debby: They wore it a lot in the prairie days because they traveled a lot and they got a lot of you know — those wagon trains and the stagecoaches and all were kind of windy. And so they would keep their bonnets on — to keep their head — their hair from blowing all over the place. Very, very common to use — to wear bonnets back then.

In the following sequence, Debby drew attention to the compound nature of the target word by breaking it up in her initial questioning. She responded to a student's phonological confusion by writing the word on the board for the students to see, thus incorporating elements of anchored instruction into the sequence. Debby also used imagery to act out how someone might sit on the hearth to help her students develop a mental image. She related the new term *hearthstone* to the more-familiar concept of a fireplace.

Debby: (reading text) "It was dusk and the dogs lay beside him on the

warm hearthstones" (MacLachlan, 1985). Do you know what a *hearthstone* is? What's a hearth? Do you know what a hearth is?

Student 1: Heart?

Debby: No (writing the word on the board). It's hearth. H-E-A-R-T-H.

Student 2: A chair?

Debby: No, not a chair.

Student 3: Like some kind of rock. (the student seemed to be attending to the second part of the compound term)

Debby: Well, it's usually made out of some kind of rock.

Student 4: Like stones together?

Debby: Well...

Student 5: A stone.

Debby: Well, like I said, it's usually made out of stones. It's like we

would call a fireplace today. So a hearthstone would be like
— if you go and sit — and you might have one in your house

where it's raised up a little bit so you can sit.

Student 6: Oh yeah!

Debby: On the hearth (sitting on the desk to demonstrate) and the fire

is right there behind you and you have a place right there on

the stone where you can sit.

Students: Oh yeah, oh yeah!

Debby: So a hearthstone would be the stones around the fireplace.

Making links to prior knowledge and personal experience is a common element in contextual approaches and in Debby's instructional sequences. She frequently asked students during reading aloud to make connections. For example, in introducing Sarah, Plain and Tall, she asked students if they knew anyone who had a stepmother. In the following example, she reminded students of their experiences with the weather to help them understand the new word hail.

Student 2 (to student 3) Do you know what *hail* is?

Student 3 Yes, I seen it on the news this morning.

Student 2: It's ice. It's ice coming down like, um

Debby: Yeah, it's when the rain, instead of coming down as water, it gets so cold that it freezes, so it will be coming down as little

balls of ice. I know you have heard it on your houses some-

times.

Student 1: Yeah (doesn't sound sure)

Student 2: I've never heard that.

Debby: You know when you think it's just a hard rain. But if you really

stop and listen you'll hear the bang, bang, bang, and the ping,

ping, ping, ping. That's usually hail. Little tiny ice.

# **Extent of Sequence**

The length or duration of an instructional sequence is dependent on several factors such as the positioning of the sequence within the read-aloud, the strategies employed, and the level of word knowledge desired. For most of the teachers in this study, instructional sequences that occurred before or after the read-aloud tended to be more extensive. This pattern seems to reflect a preference to address words that required concept building in advance of the reading and to try to minimize discussions during the story.

For example, when introducing the word *set*, Barbara took time to develop the concept of *getting set*. She provided students with the synonym *ready* and then asked students to think of examples of things they get ready for.

Barbara: Let's get set. Means let's get ready. Are there any other things

in our lives that we get ready for? Can we think of other things

that we get ready for? What else do we get ready for?

Student: School.

Barbara: We get ready for school.

After several other suggestions have been made by students, Barbara

returned to this example for further extension.

Barbara: So let's take one of those that we've thought of. Let's get ready

for school. What do we have to do to get ready for school?

Robbie?

Student: Eat breakfast and get dressed.

Barbara: We gotta eat breakfast and get dressed. That's how you get set

for school. Get ready for school.

The exchange continued with more examples of things you do to get ready for school. Barbara repeated the target term and its synonym several more times before wrapping up the discussion.

The extent of a particular sequence was also influenced by how quickly a correct response was obtained. If a student was able to respond adequately to the initial query, the sequence was ended. In the following example, a student was able to immediately identify an acceptable meaning word for a nonsense word due to the context and the phonological similarity to the target word.

Debby: [reading from Dahl's (1982) The BFG] "So I keep staring at her

and in the end her head drops on to her desk and she goes fast

to sleep and snorkles loudly."

Debby: What is that? (laughing)

Student: Snores.

If a child gave an incorrect response to the initial query, she would typically ask several more children before either providing the definition or providing additional clues. In some cases, the sequences got quite lengthy as the teacher continued soliciting responses until a correct definition was provided. In this example, many students offered possible definitions but were seemingly mislead by the context. The additional comments and clues provided by the teacher were not effective until her final admonishment to "think of noises."

Debby: [reading text] "The sheep nosed open their stall door and

milled around the barn, bleating. "

Bleating (emphasis on the /t/) not bleeding (emphasis on the

/d/). Bleating. What's bleating?

Student: Um — wet

Debby: No.

Student: Running around?

Debby: No.

Student: Scattering?
Debby: Sheep bleat.
Student: (gasp) Shed?

Debby: No.

Student: Going up (garbled).

Debby: No, bleat.

Student: Kind of like running, like running around in circles.

Debby: Think of noises.

Student: Running around in circles going baa, baa.

Debby: Okay — Bleating is saying the baa, baa — they're bleating,

okay.

At other times, attention to a word is quite concise. For example, *Duck for President* (Cronin, 2008) contained a lot of unfamiliar words for the students. Barbara elected to deal with this particular word in an abbreviated manner, perhaps since it was relatively unimportant to the story.

Barbara: And look, he had to go to a *diner*. You know what a diner is?

Student: Oh yeah, a food court.

Barbara: It's kind of like a food court. It's kind of like a small restaurant.

There was a clear tendency for the length of instructional sequences to decrease as the read-aloud progressed. Limits on time and waning student attention seemed to factor into teachers' decisions to abbreviate the instructional sequence.

# Combinations of Strategies Within Sequences

In addition to variance in the length of the instructional sequences used by the teachers, variance was also noted in the use of instructional strategies within the sequences. Analysis of strategy use during the observed read-alouds evidenced nine broad categories of instructional strategies: questioning, providing the definition, providing a synonym, examples, clarifying or correcting student responses, extending a student generated definition, labeling, the use of imagery, and morphemic analysis. As seen in Table 1, differences were noted in the num-

Table 1. Frequency of Strategy Use Within Instructional Sequences

| С | D           | Р                  | В                                 |
|---|-------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 5 | 12          | 2                  | 6                                 |
| 6 | 8           | 4                  | 4                                 |
| 4 | 6           | 3                  | 6                                 |
| 1 | 2           | 2                  | 6                                 |
| 0 | 0           | 2                  | 1                                 |
|   | 5<br>6<br>4 | 5 12<br>6 8<br>4 6 | 5 12 2<br>6 8 4<br>4 6 3<br>1 2 2 |

C = Cindy; D = Debby; P = Patricia; B = Barbara

ber of strategies typically employed within a single instructional sequence. The two second-grade teachers tended to use only one or two strategies within an exchange and showed a marked preference for questioning. When questioning proved unsuccessful, either due to a lack of prior knowledge or inadequate text support, the teacher might shift to a different strategy. For example, after reading a chapter in *Sarah*, *Plain and Tall*, Cindy asked the students to identify words they would like to add to the class vocabulary list. One child suggested *wooly ragwort*. Cindy started with an implied question, reminding students of the context in which the word occurred. From the students' responses, it became evident that another strategy was needed.

Cindy: Wooly ragwort. Where is that? What was wooly ragwort? Do

you remember? It was part of Caleb's song.

Student 1: Yeah.

Cindy: It said, or Sarah said (paraphrasing text) we don't have this by

the sea. We have seaside goldenrod and wild asters, and wooly

ragwort.

Student 2: I think it's a kind of — seal or something.

Cindy: Hmmmm? Student 3: A fish.

Cindy: Or a fish. What do you think, Henry?

Student 4: A kind of bird.

Cindy: A kind of bird. What do you think, Sasha?

Student 5: A rock.

Since it was clear that the students had not grasped the meaning, Cindy went back into the text and provided more information to help them effectively use the context clues in the passage.

The kindergarten and first-grade teacher tended to incorporate a variety of strategies within a single sequence. The use of three or four strategies was common, with more than half of the exchanges including more than two strategies.

Differences in strategy use may be the result of the teacher's perceptions of appropriate practice for their grade. Both of the second-grade teachers stressed the importance of teaching vocabulary through context clues during their interviews. This belief could account for their reliance on questioning and contextual strategies. Other strategies were used only when an adequate response was not obtained, or when a more-extensive definition was required for comprehension. The increased use of multiple strategies seen in kindergarten and first grade may reflect the teachers' beliefs that vocabulary development was an important goal apart from story comprehension.

There may be a more-pragmatic explanation as well. The stories read by the second-grade teachers were chapter books with the designated portions of the text much longer than the picture books used in kindergarten and first grade. The shorter books may afford teachers more time to develop words and employ more strategies within instructional sequences. This would suggest that text selection impacts strategy use in addition to word selection.

# **Effective and Ineffective Sequences**

The findings of the study also suggest that the effectiveness of the selected strategies in promoting word learning would vary greatly. These conclusions are clearly speculative, as no measure of word learning was obtained. There is, however, ample evidence in the data to support this interpretation. A comparison of two instructional sequences serves to demonstrate the point.

In the exchange on the word *bleating* provided above, the students attempted to use context clues and their background knowledge about sheep to construct meaning. The teacher used questioning, evaluation, context, and finally provided a definition. This was often not the first strategy employed, but was added to the instructional sequence when questioning yielded either an incorrect response or no response.

The conversation continued with a discussion of how animals, and specifically pigs, are sensitive to changes in the weather and earthquakes. It is not difficult to imagine that a child would have difficulty recalling the meaning of the target word when this exchange was over. He would have heard six incorrect responses before finally learning that bleating is the sound that sheep make, a concept that would likely be familiar to most second graders. During the subsequent assignment, one child wrote, "The sheep were baaing in circles," which seems to indicate confusion about the definition. He used the word in a way

that is more consistent with movement than with sound. Given the number of incorrect responses in the sequence that suggested movement, his confusion is hardly surprising. Thus, it would seem that a far more-effective strategy in this case would have been to simply provide the definition. This approach is consistent with research that suggests that "brief explanations (often one or two sentences) can be sufficient to establish what new words refer to" (Biemiller & Boote, 2006, p. 45). Similarly, Beck et al. (2002) caution that extended guessing can be misleading to students and recommend that teachers intervene quickly when questioning does not lead to a correct response. The questioning strategy depends on the word either being partially known to students or appearing in a very supportive context. Questioning can lead to guessing, so "it is important to provide guidance if students do not quickly know the word's meaning" (Beck et al., 2002, p. 43).

In the second exchange, a teacher incorporates questioning, clarifying, and an example from the story when discussing the target word *research*. This sequence is short and to the point.

Teacher: (reading text) "'We're doing research, just like Daddy' laughed

Jimmy." What is research? Uh, Micky?

Student: It's like, it's like looking it over again and getting until you

finally know it.

Teacher: Okay, you're looking over something to find out some new

information, aren't you.

Students: Uh hum.

Teacher: Just like they looked in the encyclopedia.

As a follow-up activity, the word *research* and its definition were written on the board. Students were asked to copy the word and definition onto an index card and to draw a picture. The cards were placed into file folders that the children called their *vocabulary suitcases*. The probability of word learning occurring as a result of this type of focused instructional sequence would seem to be greater than that of the previous example.

These examples are not meant to typify the instruction of these teachers but rather as descriptions of instructional sequences that occurred in most of the classrooms at some point during the observations. These findings suggest that the way strategies are used may be as significant to word learning as the type of strategy used. Additional research is needed to further explore the relationship between strategy implementation and word learning.

### RETHINKING THE INSTRUCTIONAL REPERTOIRE

As teachers reflect on their own practice, a rethinking of their own instructional sequences or repertoires seems warranted. With the many demands on teachers' and students' time during the day, it is essential for practices to be examined to ensure maximum learning in each instructional moment. This can be accomplished as teachers, through professional development or preservice preparation, are led to consider issues of time, purpose, and efficacy as they plan their readalouds. A critical examination of current practices yields insight into the need to rethink and re-envision the instructional repertoire to maximize learning.

### **Issues of Time**

Teachers make decisions about when vocabulary instruction should occur during read-alouds. Such instruction may occur before reading to preteach important words and concepts, during reading to draw students' attention to unusual words and the context in which they appear, and after reading to further develop conceptual understanding and make connections. Teachers should also balance the time spent in instruction with the benefits, selecting the most-effective and efficient strategy for the situation (Baumann et al., 2003). The data from this study also suggest that effective use of time through pacing considerations is a critical component of instruction. Too much time spent on one word early in the read-aloud can result in insufficient attention being given to later words. It is up to the teacher to prioritize and control the pacing so that instructional goals are met.

# **Issues of Purpose**

When considering the best instructional sequence to use in a given moment, the teacher needs to keep the purpose or goal in mind. If the main goal at the time is comprehension of the story, a short focused instructional sequence will serve the purpose without undue disruption of the story. In contrast, if the teacher's purpose is to develop the students' ability to use context clues to determine word meaning, a longer instructional sequence will likely be needed.

Prior to the read-aloud, teachers should establish vocabulary learning goals for their students (Baumann et al., 2003). Optimally, goals should feature both teacher-initiated vocabulary learning and strategy instruction that promotes student independence, taking care to select instructional strategies that are consistent with those goals (Baumann et al.).

### Issues of Effectiveness

This study has also demonstrated the need for teachers to be mindful of the effectiveness of their instruction, keeping in mind that the length of the discussion is not necessarily indicative of the quality of teaching and learning. A concise sequence in which the teacher provides a synonym or definition may be very effective, while an equally brief question-and-answer exchange might only indicate that one student knows the word. In long sequences, where multiple incorrect responses are given, the end result may be confusion and misunderstandings regarding word meaning. In contrast, a long sequence that provides or elicits examples and connections will likely produce greater understanding. Teachers need to be prepared with simple definitions and to intervene when needed to avoid confusions and misunderstanding from developing. To ensure effective teaching and learning, teachers should engage in ongoing reflection and evaluation (Baumann et al., 2003).

### **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

The differences noted in the individual read-aloud practices of the Westland teachers contribute to the body of research by describing both the nature and extent of those variations and shedding light on factors that might influence the effectiveness of instruction. When reading an account of a teacher's practice, it is easy to form judgments. Few of us would be willing to subject our own teaching to scrutiny. By sharing their own practices, the teachers in this study help all practitioners to critically examine their own teaching and thus improve instruction for the children in their classrooms. We see ourselves in the descriptions and have the opportunity to seek change.

The approaches taken by a particular teacher with regard to vocabulary reflect his/her understandings of word learning theory, albeit a tacit one. For example, a teacher who believes that words must be directly taught is likely to identify specific words for instruction and employ various strategies for teaching those words. Similarly, a teacher who believes that words are best learned incidentally may focus on providing a rich word environment, with little attention on learning specific words and meanings. In this study, the reliance on the use of context clues was noted in the instructional sequences of two teachers was consistent with their stated beliefs that context clues were the most-important strategies for learning new words.

One of the interesting findings of this study is degree that the strategy selection and sequence employed by the teachers was consistent with the research and existing instructional paradigms. The use of questioning, context, corrective feedback, and explanations were quite common in all of the teachers' interactions. Despite the fact that the teachers were unaware of published methods, the types of strategies they used in their instruction were very similar

to sequences that have proven to be effective. This would seem to indicate that classroom teachers are able to approximate the procedures of formal programs by drawing on their own repertoire of instructional strategies and knowledge of pedagogy. Determining the relative effectiveness of teacher-designed procedures and published methods is a question for future research.

# **Implications for Teacher Education**

The National Research Council (1998) recommends that teachers of young children should have "information about how to provide rich conceptual experiences that promote growth in vocabulary and reasoning skills" (p. 332) but do not offer suggestions on how that is to be accomplished or what those experiences should look like. Teacher education programs are the likely venue for this information to be shared.

One missing piece was the inclusion of postreading events that provided students with additional opportunities to hear and use the target terms. While some teachers made reference to these events anecdotally, there appeared to be little evidence to suggest that these events were thoughtfully planned and systematically developed. These second and third opportunities to interact with new terms are vital components in vocabulary development protocols (Beck & McKeown, 2001) and is consistent with the theory of extended mapping (Carey, 1978).

The findings of this study suggest that teachers may need more guidance in the selection of words for instruction, and a more thorough understanding of the role of context. Despite recommendations that "teachers study closely each book they read" (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007, p. 750), there was little evidence in this study that teachers put much advance thought into word selection or evaluation of the context in which the words appeared. When the context is rich with supportive language, word knowledge is prompted or cued (Baumann et al., 2003) and students have little difficulty inferring word meaning. When the context is lean, word knowledge is unprompted and unassisted (Baumann et al.), which may result to guessing or incorrect inferences as was evident in many of the sequences in this study.

It is clear from this study that all read-alouds are not equal in terms of word learning potential. Although all of the teachers regularly addressed vocabulary during their readings, they did so with varying degrees of effectiveness and evidence of prior planning. The practices of the four teachers in this study suggest that current methods could be improved to elevate read-alouds to powerful instructional experiences rather than merely pleasurable pastimes. Teacher educators need to be sure that the procedures and theoretical bases for vocabulary development and read-alouds receive the same attention as other instructional components to raise the instructional status of this important element.

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